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ABSTRACT

The Nancy Drew adventure series, a classic girls' favorite for over 50 years, offers less sex role stereotyping and sexist cultural indoctrination than the majority of reading textbooks now used in the elementary school classroom. Textbooks were excluded from the Title IX regulations of the 1972 Education Amendments, and a review of studies conducted since 1969 of elementary school readers reveals the continuation of a strong male sex bias in textbooks. The Nancy Drew series, on the other hand, presents a different perspective. The heroine is a paradox, appearing strong, resourceful, independent, and bold, while at the same time using traditional feminine wiles, relying on her instincts and charm. Although further study of the adventure series identifies a reduction over the years in the quality of characterization, description, and plot structure, as well as in vocabulary level, the female image in Nancy Drew is preferable to the stereotype found in most classroom reading texts. (AEA)

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THE CLUE IN THE SEXIST TEXTBOOK: EVEN NANCY DREW IS MISSING

Lois A. Marchino

Nancy Drew never read sexist textbooks. She didn't need to. She knew everything. Whether it was solving another mystery or being the charming young lady, Nancy Drew did it. Elementary school textbooks, however, show relatively few females at all, and even fewer ones who are realistic or positive.

The literature children read not only provides them with imaginative worlds but a vision of the world around them. Literature conveys messages about what is important in society: it shapes values and self-concepts. Both the overt information and the latent content of reading materials convey images of appropriate male and female behavior. Despite increased concern during the past fifteen years or so about providing children with non-sexist literature, most elementary school readers--precisely the literature most children are compelled to read--continue to present distorted and negative representations of the people who inhabit this world.

A nationwide survey of 14,000 school administrators,[1] 88% of whom are men,[2] showed that 84% of the administrators did not think that the curriculum materials in their districts were sex-biased, although 83% admitted that they had not looked. Sixty-two percent of the administrators indicated

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that sex bias would not be a consideration when they next selected textbooks.

And there is no legal compulsion to do so. Textbooks are specificially excluded from Title IX regulations of the Education Amendments of 1972. Although provisions for asking school districts to review their textbooks had been written into the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare guidelines which regulate Title IX, Secretary Weinberger of HEW personally removed them without consultation with his staff after he received a letter from a friend of his who was president of Stanford University, claiming such non-sexist criteria would conflict with academic freedom.[3] The Secretary's decision violates the spirit of the law, and permits schools to continue to impose sexist and racist materials on students.

If one would like to argue that images of females in readers are merely reflecting reality, and are not meant to provide positive role-models, a quick review of the studies in this area will dispel the case for reality. Janice Pottkar,[4] using a random sample of twenty elementary reading texts with approximately 2,000 stories, found that 57% of the women in the textbooks were housewives, and this was a conservative calculation because a woman at home with her children after school was not counted, even if there was nothing to suggest that she had a job otherwise. This figure of 57% housewives clearly does not reflect the fact that less than 16% of all households in the U. S. have a full-time homemaker-mother.[5]

In the stories, 4.4% of the women shown were secretaries, stenographers, or typists, compared to over 12% of actual employed women. Another 4.4% of the textbook women were trapeze artists, thus presenting as many trapeze artists as secretaries. Similarly, the stories portrayed as many women elephant trainers as waitresses. So much for reality.

But at least this study suggests a few stories in which females are doing something, even if it is in the circus; usually textbook girls are cuddling a doll, waiting around, or watching boys do something. Publishers claim that books about girls are less profitable than books about boys because boys will not read them, while girls do read about boys.[6] This in itself suggests that boys are conditioned to think girls are less important, but also girls in stories seldom share adventuresome activities. A study by the Council on Interracial Books[7] reported in 1976 on 100 books in English about Puerto Ricans, and found sexism even more insidious than racism. The Puerto Rican-American girls pictured were all very dark (although the dolls they played with were blond); they all wore dresses and never participated in sports; they always obeyed their father and helped their mother; and they never ventured outside the home alone. Another study showed that boys are presented as more active than girls and "smarter, with greater initiative and achievement."[8] The typical family constellation included a younger sister--little sisters were found in 34% of the

stories in first grade readers in one survey, and little brothers in only 6%. The little sisters acted as foils for the boys' greater knowledge and wisdom.[9]

Perhaps even more serious than showing females as generally passive and portraying them unrealistically in terms of activities and careers is that in some readers girls are virtually nonexistent, appearing only as minor characters or in background illustrations.[10] Women make up 53% of the population, but one study of over 8,000 pictures in elementary school texts showed females as only 31% of the total, while males were 69%.[11] The percentage of females varies by grade level; females were 32% in the second grade readers but declined to 20% by the sixth grade, as the percentage of adults pictured increased.[12]

The most famous study of sex stereotyping in children's readers is one done by a group called Women on Words and Images, who reported their study in 1972 in a book called Dick and Jane as Victims.[13] The group examined 134 elementary readers from 14 major publishers. In the 2,760 stories in these readers, the ratio of boy-centered to girl-centered stories was 5 to 2. The ratio of adult male main characters to female was 3 to 1. Male biographies predominated 6 to 1. Even stories about animals were twice as likely to be about male animals, and four times as many male folk or fantasy stories were represented as those featuring females.[14] A follow-up study of 83 new books in 1975 showed the most

glaring shortcoming still in the male-female ratio. Some publishers had added a few stories, but the overall imbalance remained: the ratio of boy-centered to girl-centered stories was 7 to 2; male illustrations to female 2 to 1, and male occupations to female occupations 3 to 1.[15] The new study concludes: "A series of readers that is nonsexist has not yet been found."[16] Florence Howe, in the November, 1979, Harvard Educational Review, sums up the situation by saying: "The decade [since the original Dick and Jane study] has produced no reader designed for contemporary boys and girls based on the realities of family living in the multi-racial and multi-ethnic United States."[17]

After reviewing the sorry state of elementary school readers--and the situation is similar in junior and senior high school readers and textbooks in all disciplines and in many college anthologies as well--I turn to children's literature outside textbooks. I go directly to that classic girls' favorite over the past 50 years, Nancy Drew. The first book in the series was The Secret of the Old Clock, in 1929. Edward Stratemeyer wrote (or plotted) the first three Nancy Drew mysteries under the name Carolyn Keene; then his daughter Harriet Stratemeyer Adams took over, and, as "Carolyn Keene," wrote a volume nearly every year after 1930. It is estimated that over 65 million copies have been sold. Nancy has solved over 50 mysteries (plus two or three versions of those which have been updated from time to time),

most of them in the summer of her eighteenth year.[18]

For a long time, rather than re-read, I preferred to preserve my memories of borrowing, trading, buying, and reading those books with the royal blue covers and the naturally curly blond heroine with blue eyes and a blue roadster who, for the most part, did exactly what she pleased. But during the past few years my nieces have been reading Nancy Drew, and Bobbie Ann Mason published a book called The Girl Sleuth: A Feminist Guide, which contains a chapter analyzing the Nancy Drew phenomenon. I decided to see how the books appear to me now. Yes, there is Nancy, through the whole series, confident, capable, courageous, and always victorious in her adventures and with promises of more. Nancy has money and mobility, and no one to boss her around. A distinguished criminal-lawyer father appears long enough to provide Nancy with background, approval, and assistance when necessary. There is no mother (she died when Nancy was three), but kindly Hannah Gruen, the housekeeper, is there to take care of the work. A faithful boyfriend, Ned Nickerson, is introduced in the fourth book of the series, The Clue in the Diary (1932), and he occasionally shows up, but he's no problem and is seldom needed. Nancy is generally accompanied by her sidekicks Bess Marvin and George Fayne, who are cousins.

But here I pause. George is a cheerful tomboy with short hair, a "girl who enjoyed her boyish name,"[19] we are told in one book, and in another that "George was too blunt

and boyish to captivate the young men" when they go to a dance.[20] Bess Marvin, her cousin, is a passive feminine fluff largely preoccupied with eating, giggling, and being scared. Neither of the girls have main parts in solving the mysteries. They are stereotyped and limited characters designed to show off Nancy's unique perfection and to demonstrate the extreme options open to women. Through them one begins to see the contradictory messages in the books. Nancy is a paradox. She is strong, resourceful, bold, and can do brilliantly anything the situation requires, from speaking obscure Spanish dialects and deciphering Indian petroglyphs to skin diving, skiing, golfing, playing the piano, or replacing a leading-lady after only one rehearsal. Yet she is a "sweet young lady who dresses nicely and enjoys having tea with little cakes."[21] She is calm, modest, and gracious, and the type of person who leaves calling cards. As Bobbie Mason points out, the settings a girl sleuth like Nancy works within are all "feminine, domestic, aristocratic, slightly Gothic--quaint reminders of a traditional, Victorian idealized world....like enlarged dollhouses."[22] Often the mystery revolves around a miniaturized version of the mansion with a secret panel, such as a carved brass chest filled with jewelry, an ivory charm, an old family album, a broken locket, twisted candles, or a scarlet slipper. If adventure is the superstructure, a dainty domesticity is the bedrock.[23] Nancy uses traditional feminine wiles, relying on her instincts and charm. Her judgement of

character is instantaneous and flawless, and the bad guys are often first spotted because they lack gallantry and proper diction. They are greedy and insolent, with piercing dark eyes, though they are never rapists or murderers, and to my knowledge no black man every lays a hand on Nancy. Minority groups such as Italian-Americans and Jews are presented negatively, and foreigners are either shifty-eyed sneaks or benevolent aristocrats. Nancy preserves the class lines: the original series of 35 or so volumes which accumulated throughout the '30s, '40s, and '50s subtly portrays around her a fading aristocracy threatened by the restless lower classes, and there is no tolerance for upstarts who don't know their place.[24]

Mysteries for the girl sleuth (and perhaps the girl reader) take the place of sex. Nancy is out looking for evil because there are treasures to be protected: something hidden, precious, and beautiful must be defended from the greedy, disreputable tricksters.[25] Unpleasant men are continually gagging her, typing her up, or hitting her with phallic objects, but they never get her down. The last page of one book (The Secret of the Forgotten City, 1975, p. 180) tells us: "The usual feeling of emptiness came over her whenever she had solved a mystery. She longed for another." Then, in the tradition of the series, it mentions that Nancy will soon find excitement in the mystery of The Sky Phantom, just as the opening pages had reminded us of her previous adventure, Mystery

of the Glowing Eye. Recent volumes seem meant for even younger readers, but there is more emphasis on dating, although it is usually group dating. In The Secret of the Forgotten City, published in 1975, for example, Nancy and George and Bess go on an archeological dig with some college students, and rather than travel in Nancy's convertible, they pair off and ride in jeeps driven by Ned and the college boys. They all sound rather like Ken and Barbie dolls.

The series seems to have degenerated generally in the past 15 or 20 years. A 1961 re-write of The Mystery at Lilac Inn, originally the fourth in the series (1931), has much less characterization and description, and even the plot is simplified. Nancy Drew is now available in paperback, and not only are the books shorter but so are the paragraphs and sentences, and the vocabulary is at a much lower reading level. There are spin-off Nancy Drew coloring books and game books and TV cartoons. A check with various bookstores and booksellers confirms that Nancy is still going strong, still "the world's most famous girl detective."[26] And Nancy Drew continues to have it both ways. She is protected by her father, boyfriend, and various helpful law officers, and is a model young lady, yet she is free and adventuresome, and does not have to confront feminist issues and anxieties. Her adventures take place outside time and space: "she is an eternal girl, a stage which is a false ideal for women in our time."[27] Yet given the kinds of sex role stereotyping and sexist cultural

indoctrination found in textbooks, girls--and boys too--are probably still doing better to read Nancy Drew than to absorb totally the stories taught in the classroom.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Janice Pottkar, "Sex Bias in the Schools," in Janice Pottkar and Andrew Fishel, eds., Sex Bias in the Schools (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 1977), p. 529. This study was originally published in Nation's Schools 91 (Dec., 1972).

[2]"Interview on Title IX," Harvard Educational Review 49, no. 4 (Nov., 1979), p. 529. As of 1979, 88% of the school administrators in the U.S. are male, although more than 65% of the teaching force is female. Since 1972, the increase in women administrators has been less than 1%.

[3]"Interview on Title IX," p. 514.

[4]Janice Pottkar, "Psychological and Occupational Sex Stereotypes in Elementary-school Readers," in Sex Bias in the Schools, p. 115. The study, published in 1977, was adapted from a study done of twenty third grade texts used in the Montgomery, Maryland, schools during the 1969-70 school year.

[5]From a list of statistics about women in Ms., Vol. VII, no. 2 (Aug., 1978), p. 43.

[6]Racism and Sexism in Children's Books, (New York: Council on Interracial Books for Children, 1976), p. 42.

[7]Racism and Sexism in Children's Books, p. 42.

[8]Cleveland Armory as quoted in "Psychological and Occupational Sex Stereotypes in Elementary-school Readers," p. 113.

[9]"Psychological and Occupational Sex Stereotypes in Elementary-school Readers," p. 113.

[10]Dick and Jane as Victims: Sex Stereotyping in Children's Readers (Princeton, N.J.: Women on Words and Images, 1975), p. 10.

[11]Lenore J. Weitzman and Diane Rizzo, Biased Textbooks: A Research Perspective (Washington, D.C.: The Resource Center on Sex Roles in Education, 1974). Pages are unnumbered.

[12]Biased Textbooks.

[13]Dick and Jane as Victims was widely distributed and is still available from Women on Words and Images.

[14]Dick and Jane as Victims, p. 10.

[15]Dick and Jane as Victims, p. 66.

[16]Dick and Jane as Victims, p. 4.

[17]Florence Howe, "Introduction" to special edition on Women and Education, Harvard Educational Review, p. 415.

[18]Bobbie Ann Mason, The Girl Sleuth: A Feminist Guide (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1975).

[19]Carolyn Keene, The Secret of the Forgotten City (N.Y.: Grosset and Dunlap, 1975), p. 11.

[20]Carolyn Keene, The Clue in the Diary (N.Y.: Grosset and Dunlap, 1932), p. 118.

[21]Mason, p. 49.

[22]Mason, p. 57.

[23]Mason, p. 60.

[24]Mason, p. 73.

[25]Mason, p. 68.

[26]Ned Nickerson calls Nancy this in The Secret of the Forgotten City, p. 2. Bobbie Mason, p. 49, calls Nancy, "the most popular girl detective in the world."

[27]Mason, p. 75.